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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the communicative approach, the role of speaking ability has become more central in language teaching. Consequently, performance testing, especially testing speaking ability, has become one of the most important issues in language testing. There are many limitations in this area because of the nature of speaking ability and the difficulty and complexity of measuring spoken utterances. The purpose of this research is to examine the following: (1) whether the proposed nine traits (pronunciation, grammar, discourse, fluency, content, vocabulary, comprehensibility, interactional competence, and sociolinguistic competence) are relevant and separable parts of speaking ability; (2) whether there is a relationship between methods and language ability; (3) whether the traits are fundamental elements of ability; and (4) how the traits are related. This research also attempts to discover the extent to which speaking ability is reflected in other standardized tests, such as the Test of Spoken English (TSE) or the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Oral Proficiency Interview (ACTFL OPI). An appendix with several sample test questions is included. (Contains 14 references.) (KFT)

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Establishing the Construct Validity of an English Speaking Test

Yuji NAKAMURA

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Establishing the Construct Validity of an English Speaking Test

Yuji NAKAMURA

Theoretical background and rationale

With the advent of the Communicative Approach, the role of speaking ability has become more central in language teaching. Consequently, performance testing, especially testing speaking ability, has become one of the most important issues in language testing.

The increasing demand for the assessment of students' English speaking skills in Japan has forced teachers to recognize certain limitations in our understanding; for example, the construct of speaking. Since we are not sure what exactly the components of speaking are, it is sometimes difficult to explain what test scores mean, especially in relative terms.

Some scholars (Boldt and Oltman 1993; Henning and Cascallar 1992; Fulcher 1994) have approached the construct of oral proficiency, and explored the structure gradually. However, still there seems to be many limitations in this area because of the nature of speaking ability and the complexity of measuring spoken utterances.

Purpose of the research

With the goal of making a construct valid test of speaking ability in mind, the purpose of this research is to examine the following points:

1) whether the proposed nine traits (pronunciation, grammar, discourse, fluency, content, vocabulary, comprehensibility, interactional competence, and sociolinguistic competence) are relevant and separable parts of speaking ability.
2) whether there is a relationship between methods and language ability. For this purpose, three methods (a writing test, an interview test, and a tape-mediated speaking test) were designed.
3) whether the traits are fundamental elements of ability.
4) how the traits (with the same name across the three methods e.g. grammar in writing, grammar in the interview, and grammar in the tape test) are related.

The research will also attempt to discover the extent to which the proposed construct of speaking is reflected in other standardized tests such as the Test of Spoken English(TSE) or the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Oral Proficiency Interview (ACTFL OPI).

Research design and methods

Twenty-nine college students took the set of tasks (a writing test, an interview test, and a tape-mediated speaking test). Seven English teachers, who are all native speakers of English, scored the test results using the 1-4 point scale rating sheet. Among the seven teachers, two of them rated the writing results, another two rated the interview test results, and the other three rated the tape-mediated test results.

Establishment of Research Instrument Procedure

1) The operational definition of each trait is given below.
   The general outline of the operational definition is whether a speaker can express effectively him/herseif by using the following eight sub-traits

(1) pronunciation
——segmental features (individual sounds; vowels and consonants)
——supra-segmental features (stress, rhythm, intonation)
——volume (audible or not)
(2) grammar
——tense and aspect
——noun-verb agreement
——word order
——noun-personal pronoun agreement
(3) vocabulary
——variety of words
——word choice
——idioms
——nuances
(4) content
——creativity
——imaginativeness

(5)-(a) fluency for speaking

——ease of speaking

——speed

——length, place and frequency of pauses

(5)-(b) fluency for writing—intelligibility

——how easy the composition is to read

——how smoothly raters can read through the sentences

(6) discourse

——cohesiveness

——logical combination of sentences

(7) interactional competence

——ability to use conversationally formulaic expressions

(8) sociolinguistic competence

——ability to express his or her ideas in a sociolinguistically appropriate manner

(9) comprehensibility

——the degree of intelligibility to the raters or overall impression

*— means examples of each trait

2) Making a matrix of traits and methods

*···means cannot be measured

** method in this research means task (writing, an interview, a tape-mediated speaking test)

	Method		
	Writing/ test	Interview/ test	Tape-mediated speaking test
Trait			
1) pronunciation	·····		
2) grammar			
3) fluency			
4) discourse			
5) content			
6) vocabulary			
7) interactional competence			
8) sociolinguistic competence			
9) comprehensibility			

Making each test

1) Writing Test

——Students will be given a cartoon or a comic strip and given 15 minutes to write a composition of 100 words about the cartoon. There are two types of cartoons. One is a narrative type for evaluating students' grammar, fluency, discourse, content, vocabulary. The other is a conversation type for evaluating students' interactional competence and sociolinguistic competence.

2) Interview Test

——A 5-minute conversation with the classroom teacher following the suggested procedure below. (N.B. This test is video-taped, so a VCR machine is needed.) The teacher will choose some of these questions which are relevant to probe each student's speaking ability.

1) Greeting

Self-introduction(Please introduce yourself by giving your name, the name of your high school and your hobbies.)

2) Short answer interview.

Where do you come from?

Do you have any club activities?

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

How do you come to school?

How long does it take to come to school?

Do you do a part-time job?

3) Long answer interview

Can you tell me more about your high school?

How many students are there?

Where is it located?

Can you tell me more about your family?

What do your family members do?

Can you tell me more about your club activities?

How many members are there?

How often do you meet with them?

Can you tell me more about your hobbies?

Why do you like them?

When did you start?

Tell me more about your part-time job.

What is your job?

What do you actually do?

What is your favorite TV program?

What kind of program is it?

Why do you like it?

What is the most interesting news these days?

Why do you think it is interesting?

What do you think about it?

4) Free form

Tell me more about your life at college

Do you talk to teachers?-What are the teachers like?

Do you ever eat lunch at the dining hall?-What is the dining room like?

Do you go to the library?-What is the library like?

5) Winding up

Note:

We needed something to elicit students' sociolinguistic competence and interactional competence, such as a role play. However, it would interrupt the natural flow of conversation between the interviewer and the student. Interviewers should include natural/authentic questions in order to measure students' interactional and sociolinguistic competence in the greeting section and the winding up section so that interviewers do not need to stop the natural flow of conversation to start a role play abruptly. It is possible to say that the teacher-student conversation is one type of sociolinguistic context. Students' sociolinguistic ability can be measured through their ability to use formal expressions or polite expressions in the interview context. It may also be true that interactional ability can be rated through students' ability to handle necessary formulaic expressions in their responses to their interviewers.

Conclusion for the note.

Any test is a sample of the whole language proficiency. The interview test is a sample of the whole language proficiency although it restricts the great possibilities of the measurement. Interview tests can be considered as samples of the whole sociolinguistic and interactional context in the real world. Therefore, the interview test is valid as a test tool to measure students' language proficiency.

We can think of the questions and responses that appear in the interview session as samples of sociolinguistic and interactional things in the restricted context of a teacher-student relationship.

They are having an interaction in the interview. So their responses can be measured in terms of interactional ability. If students can interact with interviewers using formulaic expressions and polite expression appropriately, then we think students can also have sociolinguistic/interactional competencies.

3) Tape-mediated speaking test (See Appendix)
   - ——speech making test
   - ——interactional competence test
   - ——sociolinguistic competence test

Administration of the Test

1) Subjects

   29 students of Tokyo Keizai University

2) Test administration

   Tests were conducted in class.

Rating procedure and rating scale

1) A writing test was conducted by the researcher and evaluated by two raters(native speakers of English).

Rating Scale for Writing

(- - - means cannot be measured)

	1 poor	2	3	4 good
1) grammar				
2) discourse				
3) content				
4) vocabulary				
5) *fluency				
6) interactional competence				
7) sociolinguistic competence				
8) pronunciation - - -				
9) overall impression (comprehensibility)				

* fluency in writing means how easy it is to read, and how smoothly raters can read through it.

2) Interview tests were administered by two classroom teachers (native speakers of English) and evaluated by themselves.

Rating Scale for Interview

	1 poor	2	3	4 good
1) pronunciation				
2) grammar				
3) discourse				
4) content				
5) vocabulary				
6) fluency				
7) interactional competence				
8) sociolinguistic competence				
9) overall impression (comprehensibility)				

3) Tape-mediated tests were administered by the researcher and evaluated by three raters (native speakers of English).

Rating Scale for Speaking Test

	1 poor	2	3	4 good
1) pronunciation				
2) grammar				
3) discourse				
4) content				
5) vocabulary				
6) fluency				
7) overall impression (comprehensibility)				
8) interactional competence test				
9) sociolinguistic competence test				

Data Analysis

Factor analysis was adopted 1) to examine the categorization of traits, 2) to investigate the relationship between the method and the factor, 3) to explore the degree of contribution of the trait in each factor.

Inter-trait correlation coefficients within each method were calculated in order to check the reciprocity of each trait internally within each factor. Also the correlations over three methods were examined to show the relationship among the traits.

The correlations among three methods were computed to investigate the relationship among them.

Results and Discussion

1. Results of Factor Analysis (Principal Component Factor Analysis)

Table 1 shows that three factors were extracted through the factor analysis, and these three factors agree with the different methods designed previously for this research as follows:

Table 1 Results of Factor Analysis

trait	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Communality
icompre	0.93	0.12	0.11	0.89
idiscour	0.9	0.13	0.06	0.83
ifluency	0.82	0.24	0.21	0.78
iso-com	0.81	0.08	0.16	0.69
igramm	0.75	0.13	0.22	0.64
ivocabul	0.65	0.38	0.19	0.61
iin-com	0.65	0.29	0.1	0.52
ipronun	0.62	0.36	0	0.51
icontent	0.61	0.3	0.1	0.47
tdiscour	0.17	0.93	0.03	0.89
tcontent	0.22	0.84	0.12	0.76
tcompre	0.31	0.84	−0.01	0.8
tvocabul	0.26	0.83	0.09	0.76
tgramm	−0.06	0.82	0.22	0.73
tfluency	0.33	0.79	0.1	0.74
tpronun	0.36	0.71	0.22	0.68
tso-com	0.29	0.55	0.32	0.49
tin-com	0.28	0.47	0.43	0.49
wcompr	0.2	−0.03	0.89	0.84
wdiscou	0.07	0.24	0.84	0.76
wconten	0.23	0.23	0.81	0.77
wgramm	−0.02	0.05	0.79	0.64
win-com	0.05	0.28	0.79	0.7
wfluenc	0.04	0.25	0.78	0.68
wvocabu	0.41	0.09	0.66	0.6
wso-com	0.17	−0.12	0.61	0.41
eigenval	10.83	3.85	3	
pct. of var	41.7	14.8	11.5	
cum.pct	41.7	56.5	68	

Note:

In the column of trait, "i" means an interview, "t" means a tape test and "w" means writing.

1) Factor 1 (Direct Oral Communication Ability) (DOCA)

Items for this factor are comprehensibility, discourse, fluency, sociolinguistic competence, grammar, vocabulary, interactional competence, pronunciation and content. We will name this factor Direct Oral Communication Ability. This ability

deals with students' speaking ability in the face to face context, or students' reciprocal ability in the live context. The students utilize these linguistic elements for communication with some strategies such as eye contact or facial expressions. Therefore, students work on non-verbal signs as well as verbal messages.

2) Factor 2 (Semi-Direct Oral Communication Ability) (SDOCA)
Items for this factor are discourse, content, comprehensibility, vocabulary, grammar, fluency, pronunciation, sociolinguistic competence and interactional competence. Factor 2 is named Semi-Direct Oral Communication Ability. This ability concerns students' speaking ability without being influenced by the external or the non-verbal elements. Students can/should focus on the monologue type communication by expressing their own ideas, or they can perform in English by concentrating on the in-coming information through their ears.

3) Factor 3 (Written Communication Ability) (WCA)
Items for this factor are comprehensibility, discourse, content, grammar, interactional competence, fluency, vocabulary and sociolinguistic competence. We can call Factor 3 Written Communication Ability because students could communicate with each other through the written form. Students should take into consideration the context or the situation in which they are supposed to express their ideas.

The reason I have used the term "communication" for these three abilities is that students could communicate with each other in any of the three ways, by using verbal messages, by adopting non-verbal messages or by taking the written form. All are related to communication.

In the table, if there is a communication ability per se, the cumulative percentage of the variance suggests that 68% of the whole language ability ("communication ability") can be explained by these three factors. The remaining 32% which cannot be clarified by the present results may involve reading ability, listening ability as well as strategic skills or cultural awareness which could be composite of the whole language ability.

Correlation Coefficients of Three Methods (Abilities)

Table 2 Correlation of Three Abilities

	writing	interview	tape-test
writing			
interview	0.36 (p=.052)		
tape-test	0.38 (p=.042)	0.55 (p=.002)	

(n=29)

1) There is very low correlation between writing (WCA) and an interview (DOCA), and between writing and a tape test (SDOCA). In other words, writing is quite different from interview and tape testing in the sense of a test mode. An interview and a tape test require audio dealing ability while writing does not. Therefore, it is not surprising that there is a comparatively high correlation between tape test and interview, because they both cope with students' oral proficiency. What we could conclude from this result is that although three factors (WCA, DOCA and SDOCA) were obtained through the factor analysis, writing ability (WCA) is a different one from DOCA and SDOCA, which is quite understandable and not surprising.
2) An interview (DOCA) and a tape test (SDOCA) are distinct because some students feel nervous about speaking to a machine just mechanically, while other students do not feel easy when they must talk to an interlocutor in the interview session even with their teachers. Thus, the test practice can affect the difference of the two abilities.

Investigation of Individual Traits

Since there were no irregular traits in the factor analysis for constructing the factors, each trait in each factor was contributing well to form the reasonable factor. Also, they (the nine traits in each factor) were relevant as components of each factor. The question whether the traits were separable or not could be clarified through the following inter-trait correlations in Table 3 (Table 3-1 to Table 3-3).

Table 3 Inter-Trait Correlations

Table 3-1 Inter-Trait Correlations in Writing

	gram	disco	cont	voca	flue	inter	socio-	comp
grammar								
discourse	0.74							
content	0.58	0.82						
vocabular	0.48	0.6	0.64					
fluency	0.64	0.73	0.74	0.64				
inter-comp	0.61	0.67	0.73	0.54	0.65			
socio-comp	0.51	0.35	0.35	0.4	0.36	0.58		
comprehensibility	0.67	0.81	0.81	0.68	0.68	0.7	0.54	

Table 3-2 Inter-Trait Correlations in Interview

	pron	gram	disco	cont	voca	flue	incom	socm	comp
pronunciation									
grammar	0.59								
discourse	0.56	0.68							
content	0.55	0.52	0.61						
vocabular	0.51	0.5	0.7	0.52					
fluency	0.47	0.71	0.83	0.59	0.65				
inter-comp	0.46	0.52	0.72	0.65	0.53	0.76			
socio-comp	0.66	0.75	0.69	0.47	0.57	0.7	0.44		
comprehensibility	0.62	0.7	0.83	0.57	0.73	0.79	0.67	0.79	

Table 3-3 Inter-Trait Correlations in Tape Test

	pron	gram	voca	conte	flue	disco	compr	int-c	socio-
pronunciation									
grammar	0.62								
vocabular	0.68	0.65							
content	0.69	0.7	0.8						
fluency	0.63	0.55	0.74	0.76					
discourse	0.68	0.66	0.78	0.71	0.83				
comprehensibility	0.72	0.59	0.78	0.81	0.88	0.77			
int-comp	0.63	0.54	0.42	0.52	0.41	0.38	0.36		
socio-comp	0.53	0.56	0.65	0.56	0.51	0.47	0.52	0.68	

In this table, as the inter-trait correlations in writing(Table 3-1: the range is from .35 to .82), those in an interview test (Table 3-2:the range is from .44 to.83) and those in a tape test (Table 3-3:the range is from .36 to .88) show, the traits are all mutually interrelated and mutually exclusive. Therefore, it might be possible to say that they are separable.

This is beyond the scope of the factor analysis: however, a little investigation of the same-trait different-method analysis demonstrates that correlations of the same traits across the three methods are not as high as expected. (See Table 4)

Table 4 Correlations of the same traits across the three methods

Table 4-1 Correlations of the same traits between Writing and Interview

	wgram	wdis	wcon	wvoc	wflue	win-com	wso-comp	wcomp
igramm	0.2							
idis		0.13						
icont			0.18					
ivoc				0.49				
iflue					0.2			
iin-com						0.26		
iso-com							0.21	
icompr								0.32

Table 4-2 Correlations of the same traits between Writing and Tape-Test

	wgram	wdis	wcon	wvoc	wflue	win-com	wso-comp	wcomp
tgramm	0.11							
tdis		0.12						
tcont			0.33					
tvoc				0.17				
tflue					0.31			
tin-com						0.47		
tso-comp							0.31	
tcompr								0.05

Table 4-3 Correlations of the same traits between Interview and Tape-Test

	igram	idis	icont	ivoc	iflue	iin-comp	iso-comp	icompr	ipron
tgramm	0.11								
tdis		0.21							
tcont			0.29						
tvoc				0.48					
tflue					0.44				
tin-comp						0.27			
tso-comp							0.29		
tcompr								0.39	
tpronu									0.62

N.B.: gramm=grammar; dis=discourse; cont=content; voc=vocabulary; flue=fluency; in-comp=interactional competence; so-comp=sociolinguistic competence; compr=comprehensibility; pronun=pronunciation

One possible reason for the low inter-trait correlations is that traits in each method are internally influenced by the nature of the factor and eventually presented the low correlation against the other traits in the other methods even though they have the same naming. Another possible reason is that the original definition of each trait might not be clear. Still another possible reason is that the trait in each method was basically different. In other words, there is a great possibility that grammatical ability in spoken form is different from grammatical ability in written form.

Comparison among an Interview Test, a Tape Test, ACTFL and TSE

Let us take a look at the components of the four tests before we compare them.

Components of an Interview Test

pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, discourse, content, comprehensibility, interactional-competence, sociolinguistic-competence

Components of a Tape Test

pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, discourse,content, comprehensibility, interactional-competence, sociolinguistic-competence

Components of ACTFL

pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, fluency, pragmatic competence(=confident use of various conversation management devices), sociolinguistic competence (appropriate

use of the major registers)

N.B. The idea of pragmatic competence is similar to that of interactional competence in the present research, and the idea of sociolinguistic competence resembles that of sociolinguistic competence in the present research.

Components of TSE

former version

pronunciation, grammar, fluency, overall comprehensibility

revised version

communicative language ability (communicative effectiveness)

——comprehensibility

——linguistic accuracy (pronunciation, grammar, fluency, vocabulary)

——coherence and use of cohesive devices

——appropriateness of response to audience/situation

——addressing the communicative task

Judging from the results of this research, an interview test and a tape test are measuring the whole communication ability from different modes. They might cover some common linguistic areas while there are some distinct areas that the counter part cannot compensate for. This might be true for the situation between ACTFL and TSE. ACTFL through an interview test and TSE through a tape test seem to play a similar role as the interview test and the tape test do in the present research for measuring the whole communication ability.

Since, through this research, we were able to find the indispensable role played by both the direct and the semi-direct speaking tests, it is not as difficult to presume that ACTFL and TSE will function in the same way because of the similar components of these speaking tests.

Conclusions

Three factors obtained from the factor analysis corresponds with three methods designed for measuring the ability. These three factors were named Direct Oral Communication Ability, Semi-Direct Oral Communication Ability and Written Communication Ability individually according to the nature of each ability.

As far as speaking ability is concerned, the two modes mentioned above are rather distinct judging from the factor analysis. However, both are measuring the common area

of communication ability with the level of .55 correlation coefficients.

Nine traits in Direct Oral Communication Ability (Interview Test) contribute to become the fundamental elements of the factor while they still maintain their own characteristics which cannot be replaced by other traits. This idiosyncrasy was made clear through the inter-trait correlation coefficients. The same is true for the nine traits in Semi-Direct Oral Communication Ability. The nine traits are functioning as factor construct elements but they still have their distinctiveness.

The traits in each factor, even though they have the same naming (grammar, vocabulary, discourse etc.), are working separately from the other two in each factor. One reason for this phenomenon is that the trait, influenced by the other traits internally within the factor, produced a new phase of the trait. Another reason is that the trait in one factor is basically different from the other two similar named traits in other factors, even though they have the same name. In other words, it would be possible to coin the terms such as "grammar in face to face situations," "grammar in the tape test situation." The solution to this problem is left in the results of a well-organized multi-trait multi-method analysis.

One way to look at the low correlation among the methods can be explained as follows: The lower or intermediate-lower level students do not necessarily demonstrate their competence in all language abilities. Some are poor at writing, some are good at interview tests and others are skillful in speaking without an interlocutor. It is said that unlike these lower or intermediate lower students, advanced or high intermediate level students show their constantly high language competence in various language skills. This fact might be one of the causes of the lower inter-method correlations.

Interview tests could measure part of the whole communication ability, and tape tests could measure part of the whole communication ability. The traits in each method can be a good composite of the ability the method is measuring.

We were able to find some similarities between the present interview test and ACTFL interview test, and between the present tape mediated test and TSE. Further research with the concurrent validity will enforce the relationship among these tests.

Finally, the following points should be taken into account for future study.

1) The number of testees should be increased to get more generalizable results.

2) A much higher inter-rater reliability within each method should be obtained.

3) More exhaustive study of traits and methods through multi-trait multi-method

analysis should be undertaken.

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Appendix

1) Speech Making Test

Please choose one topic you want to talk about among the eight topics given below and give a two-minute speech about it. (my friends, my family, part-time work, my hobbies, traveling fashion telephone conversations, college life)

2) Interactional Competence Test

Please give a quick and appropriate response in English to each sentence or question which will be heard through your headphones.

——Nice to meet you.

——What is your name?

——Could you spell it please?

——How are you?

——What do you do?

——Can you tell me the time?

——What is the date today?

——What is the weather like today?

——What do you usually do on Sundays?

——How do you come to school?

3) Sociolinguistic Competence Test

Please give an appropriate response in English in each context.

——Context 1 (Apologizing and making an excuse)

——Context 2 (Complaining and requesting)

——Context 3 (Asking for repetition)

——Context 4 (Interrupting)

——Context 5 (Telephoning: taking a message)